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1. Status of Leopards in India

Status of Leopards in India, 2022

There are an estimated 13,874 leopards in India, up from 12,852 in 2018, according to the 'Status of Leopards in India, 2022' report, released by the Union Environment Ministry recently.

Importance

Indian leopards (*Panthera pardus fusca*) are distributed across a variety of forested habitats in India, Nepal, Bhutan, and parts of Pakistan. Being apex predators, they sit at the top of the food chain, and thus play a crucial role in maintaining a balanced ecosystem. Like lions (*Panthera leo*), leopards came to India from the west, most likely Ethiopia.

Regional Trends

According to the recently released report, Central India and Eastern Ghats has the highest population of leopards (8,820), followed by the Western Ghats (3,596), and the Shivalik Hills and Gangetic Plains (1,109). Statewise, Madhya Pradesh boasts of the largest population of leopards (3,907), followed by Maharashtra (1,985), Karnataka (1,879) and Tamil Nadu (1,070).

The data shows that the leopard population hasn't grown the same way the tiger population has grown. It is a marginal increase.

Decrease in population in some regions

Nonetheless, leopard populations declined in a few regions. The report showed that the Shivalik Hills and Gangetic Plains recorded a worrying 3.4% per annum decline, going down from 1,253 in 2018 to 1,109 in 2022.

Several states too reported a decline in leopard population. In Odisha the number of leopards dropped from 760 in 2018 to 562 in 2022, and in Uttarakhand, the population declined from 839 in 2018 to 652 in 2022. Kerala, Telangana, Chhattisgarh, Bihar, and Goa too reported population declines.

One factor behind this decrease can be the increase in tiger populations. For instance, Uttarakhand Forest officials said that some regions have recorded a significant decline in leopard population possibly due to increased tiger density.

Other factors include a number of external threats, such as poaching and habitat loss. Road accidents are also a significant cause of leopard fatalities.

Table E.1: Estimated leopard numbers in each landscape from 2018 and 2022 (Number in parenthesis are one standard error limit of the mean).

State	2018 Population (SE)	2022 Population (SE)
Bihar	98 (8)	86 (3)
Uttarakhand	839 (48)	652 (77)
Uttar Pradesh	316 (39)	371 (54)
Shivalik Hills & Gangetic Plains	1,253 (95)	1,109 (134)
Andhra Pradesh	492 (31)	569 (41)
Telangana	334 (16)	297 (20)
Chhattisgarh	852 (39)	722 (45)
Jharkhand	46 (10)	51 (10)
Madhya Pradesh	3,421 (150)	3,907 (215)
Maharashtra	1,690 (99)	1,985 (122)
Odisha	760 (33)	568 (35)
Rajasthan	476 (39)	721 (112)
Central India & Eastern Ghats	8071 (417)	8,820 (600)
Goa	86 (3)	77 (13)
Karnataka	1,783 (71)	1,879 (261)
Kerala	650 (28)	570 (76)
Tamil Nadu	868 (40)	1,070 (132)
Western Ghats	3387 (142)	3,596 (482)
Arunachal Pradesh	11 (3)	42 (10)
Assam	47 (9)	74 (11)
North Bengal	83 (17)	233 (21)
North Eastern Hills, and Brahmaputra Floodplains	141 (26)	349 (42)
India	12,852 (680)	13,874 (1,258)

Benefits from tiger conservation efforts

While a rise in the tiger population has been known to adversely impact the habitat and resources available to leopards and other creatures lower down the predator chain, tiger conservation efforts have also helped grow leopard populations.

Take, for instance, the Central India and Eastern Ghats landscape, which boasts of the largest leopards population. Wildlife officials told that the leopard population in this landscape is growing, largely due to protective measures under the umbrella of tiger conservation.

The report stated that "leopard densities are higher in the Tiger Reserves compared to outside Protected Areas, despite the fact that tigers exert regulatory pressure on leopards."

For instance, Madhya Pradesh Principal Chief Conservator said, Tiger in Madhya Pradesh is an umbrella species. When we conserve the tiger, we also conserve the co-predators, the vegetation, and the whole habitat as a whole.

Leopard-human conflict remains a worry

Leopards' adaptability in terms of habitat and dietary preferences help them to thrive in agro-pastoral areas, plantations, and near human settlements. This, however, has led to increasing leopard-human conflict.

According to the report, in the Shivalik region, roughly 65% of the leopard population is present outside protected areas. The Uttarakhand Forest Department said that 30% of all wildlife-caused human deaths and injury cases were due to leopards (570 of nearly 2,000 cases from the last five years).

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Environment

Source: Indian Express

2. Supreme Court overturned its 2018 decision, which set a time limit on courts' stay orders

Why in news?

"Sometimes, in the quest of justice we end up doing injustice. Asian Resurfacing is a clear example of the same," a five-judge Constitution bench of the Supreme Court said on Thursday (February 29), overruling its 2018 decision in Asian Resurfacing v. Central Bureau of Investigation.

Stay in Judicial Proceedings

In 2018, a three-judge bench were deciding a batch of cases involving the Prevention of Corruption Act. These batches of cases had one aspect in common – that the respective High Courts had granted a stay at some stage of trial. Stay orders are passed for a court to temporarily halt a judicial proceeding, to secure the rights of a citizen.

Grant of stay invariably delays the trial, irrespective of which side benefits from it. For example, if an HC in a case had to consider the challenge against an order framing charges (by the trial

court), it would first grant a stay of trial and then grant a date for hearing arguments on framing charges.

With Courts bogged down with criminal cases that perhaps need more immediate attention, such as bail cases, the hearing against framing of charges gets delayed. In our three-tier system of courts, a trial court's decision can be challenged at every stage, not just at the final stage after a verdict is delivered. It is not uncommon to find trials pending for decades because a stay is in operation.

What the 2018 bench ruled in the Asian Resurfacing case

In Asian Resurfacing, the SC held that while a "High Court has jurisdiction in appropriate case to consider the challenge against an order framing charge and also to grant stay but how such power is to be exercised and when stay ought to be granted needs to be considered further."

To address the big problem plaguing the criminal justice system, of undue delays in trials, the SC held that interim orders of stay at the High Court and Civil Court level will be only valid for six months. At the end of this period, they will automatically be rescinded or "vacated".

Supreme Court overturns Asian Resurfacing judgment; no automatic vacation of stay orders after six months



What was the impact of the 2018 ruling?

As anticipated, with the 2018 ruling, several trials on stay virtually rose from the dead without notice. Lawyers would cite the Asian Resurfacing ruling to alter the status quo.

For example, say a flimsy or frivolous FIR is filed and a trial court has issued summons. This would be challenged before the HC, but the HC would first stay the summons and grant a date for the hearing. But citing the Asian Resurfacing case meant that a trial court would issue non-bailable warrants suddenly for not appearing before the Court. All this, while the HC had not yet heard arguments for quashing the summons itself.

Key questions before SC

While this added the load on the HCs and burdened the average litigant, it also raises key questions of law. These questions were framed by another bench headed by CJI DY Chandrachud in December last year.

First, whether the SC, under Article 142 of the Constitution (which allows the Supreme Court to pass any order to secure "complete justice") can order automatic vacation of all interim orders of the HC of staying proceedings of Civil and Criminal cases on the expiry of a certain period?

Second, whether the SC, under Article 142 of the Constitution, can direct the HCs to decide pending cases in which interim orders of stay of proceedings have been granted on a day-to-day basis and within a fixed period?

On what grounds has the 2018 ruling been undone?

The five-judge bench held that constitutional courts should refrain from laying down precise timelines for deciding cases, highlighting the discretion that should be afforded to lower courts which are more aware of "grassroots issues". The SC also pointed out that courts often have different patterns when it comes to their pending caseload, and so the concerned court is best placed to decide which cases to prioritise.

The court also held that the bench in Asian Resurfacing did not have the power to set a six-month time limit for vacating stay orders. The bench in Asian Resurfacing had invoked Article 142.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: Indian Express

3. Why have two northeast States opposed the scrapping of the Free Movement Regime with Myanmar?

Why in News?

The Mizoram Assembly on February 28 and the Nagaland Assembly on March 1 adopted a resolution to oppose the Centre's decision to fence the 1,643 km long porous India-Myanmar border and scrap the Free Movement Regime (FMR) agreement that allows cross-border movement up to 16 km without travel documents.

What led to the resolutions?

At an official event in Guwahati on January 20, Home Minister Amit Shah said the Centre has decided to fence the India-Myanmar border and scrap the FMR implemented in 2018 as part

of India's Act East policy for cultural, business, and terrestrial connectivity to Southeast Asia and beyond.

The Centre decided to suspend the FMR ostensibly to thwart illegal migration of people, the smuggling of drugs, arms and ammunition, and the cross-border movement of extremists. The decision was influenced by the Manipur government's push — after the ethnic violence between the Meiteis and the Kuki-Zo people began on May 3, 2023 — for fencing the border to stop Myanmar nationals from settling in the State illegally.

Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur welcomed the Centre's decision but Mizoram and Nagaland, the other two States bordering Myanmar, opposed it because of the ethnic composition along the border "imposed by the British rulers" and their age-old social, cultural, and trade links.

Why is the India-Myanmar border in focus?

India has had an on-off diplomatic relationship with Myanmar since 1948 when the latter attained independence from the British. India's border districts absorbed waves of refugees following military coups and pro-democracy movements in Myanmar in the 1960s, 1980s, and after February 2021.



The areas of Myanmar bordering India are controlled by ethnic militias and extremist groups such as the Arakan Army, Chin National Front, and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland

(Khaplang), some of which have sheltered northeast-based outfits such as the United Liberation Front of Asom. These outfits have carried out hit-and-run operations in India. Although the Myanmar border is guarded by the paramilitary Assam Rifles, the terrain and lack of fencing are said to have made it difficult to check the movement of extremists and the trafficking of drugs, arms, and other contraband items.

What do the resolutions say?

Much of India's present-day northeast was temporarily under Burmese occupation until the British pushed them out in the 1800s. The victors and the vanquished signed the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, leading to the current alignment of the boundary between India and Burma, later renamed Myanmar.

The border divided people of the same ethnicity and culture —specifically the Nagas of Nagaland and Manipur and the Kuki-Chin-Mizo communities of Manipur and Mizoram — without their consent. Asserting the right of the Mizo-Chin people to live together, Mizoram's Home Minister K. Sapdanga, moving the resolution, said a fence would divide their ancestral land and alienate people with blood ties.

Nagaland's Deputy Chief Minister, Y. Patton, said while moving the resolution in the State Assembly that the Centre's move would disrupt the age-old ties of the Naga people living on both sides of the international border.

Mr. Sapdanga belongs to the Zoram People's Movement, a party said to have been backed by the BJP. Mr. Patton is a key leader of the BJP, a minor partner in the coalition headed by the Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party.

What impact will the resolutions have?

In March 2021, the Supreme Court said there was no harm in State Legislative Assemblies adopting resolutions against central laws like the Citizenship (Amendment) Act. It said that such resolutions are merely "opinions" of the majority members of an Assembly and do not have the force of law. Some of the northeast States have adopted several resolutions over the decades but these have had little impact apart from reflecting the sentiments of the people.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: The Hindu